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AUTHOR Goldsmith, Peggy; Robinson, Trish
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ABSTRACT

To help children develop a concept of "words," this document introduces parallels from languages other than English so that children, especially those learning English as a second language, can become aware of similarities across languages and recognize links between their first language and English. Answers to questions often asked by teachers--such as What words do children most need to learn? Why are some words easier to learn than others? and How can we make words important for children?--are discussed. The document also provides activities to promote word knowledge, including playing with words and word sorts (such as closed sorts, open sorts, minimal meaning units, meaning links, and meaning links in Chinese). Examples of and activities for learning borrowed words (from aboriginal languages and current borrowings and coinings), word clines, semantic webbing, and idiomatic words and phrases are also provided. (SRT)

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Developing Word Knowledge

Peggy Goldsmith
Trish Robinson"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
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Teachers have never doubted the importance of developing word knowledge in all children and they know how communication breaks down when learners lack the necessary words. For children learning a second language, particularly, just knowing words and meanings is not enough—they must also know how words are put together to make meaning.

In what follows, we have introduced some parallels from languages other than English, so that you can make your children aware of similarities across

languages. This should help children coming to English as a Second Language (ESL) to realise that there are links between their first language and English. It should also help to make other languages more real and interesting to children who have English as their only language.

The activities we have suggested vary in level and difficulty. We have not prescribed what will fit where, preferring that you make your own assessment of what will best suit your children's particular needs.

Children's Awareness of Words

Although recent studies indicate that some quite young children are capable of developing a concept of 'word', many children have only a hazy notion of 'word/s' when they enter school. Because young children focus mainly on making sense of the language around them, and on the feeling side of language, i.e. the mood of the people speaking, they are not so aware of individual words.

When adults label items in a child's world, they may say they use individual words, but the child is more likely to be dwelling on understanding the experience or feel of the word than to be conscious of acquiring a new 'word'. For instance, 'Water!' said with a smile by an adult, when a child is in the bath, may be imitated by 'Water!' from the child. Yet the child is thinking, 'It feels warm; it splashes; it wets me; I don't want to get out.'

It is only gradually that children pick up the label 'word', if adults and other children use it when talking to them. But since the time they were born, given normal development, they have been responding to words, sounds and conversations. So they can draw on a tremendous knowledge of words and concepts, categories of words, and relationships between words when they are finally called on to think about what a word is, to add to the words they know and to discuss words as they are spoken or written.

This tremendous store of knowledge may remain untapped when children come to school unless you provide opportunities for them to make the links between what they already know and what they need to express. This is particularly important if the children's word knowledge has been developed in a language other than English.

Questions Teachers Ask

What words do children most need to learn?

Words they ask about! Those that interest them, through their reading, writing or theme work in class, and through their activities and interests outside school.

Why are some words easier to learn than others?

Because children might hear or read certain words and then want to experiment or play with them in their conversations with others or in their writing. These words become easier to learn because they can be linked to what the child already knows and because the child has had practice in using them.

How can we make words important for children?

Our own attitudes and interest in words can foster the development of children's word knowledge and their preparedness to take 'risks' in using words. If you demonstrate an interest in the children's growing repertoire of words, encourage them to collect fresh

words, discuss the coining of new words and explain how new understandings are gained from established words, the chances are the children will catch and develop this excitement and interest in words.

How can we find out about the words children have actually acquired?

Scores on classroom tests will only show part of what children know. We can gain a better understanding of children's word knowledge by listening to them and observing them participating in class activities that require the use of words and word knowledge. The 'real' test comes in situations, often outside the classroom, when particular words needed are remembered and used appropriately.

What does wordplay have to do with language learning?

Through wordplay children can explore a familiar oral tradition in ways which help their language learning and their learning about the culture in which

they live. Familiarity with words is one of the most important factors in knowing how to spell and use them confidently. Wordplay comes naturally to many children and it is the basis of a lot of the jokes they enjoy so much. It is a fun way of exploring words, of making sound/meaning links between them and extending recognition.

Is spelling part of word knowledge?

Yes! Spelling and word knowledge are inextricably bound together. By the time that children are literate the 'spelling' of words becomes a new source of word knowledge in their reading, whereas before oral knowledge of words was their main source of supply. In both cases, meaning binds the connections together in this new knowledge. All activities and strategies that are used to cement meanings, enhance the memory or interest the child in words, are valuable in the development of word knowledge and spelling.

Activities to Promote Word Knowledge

Playing with words

Although teachers are accustomed to using oral word games with young children, their programs may label them generally as language activities, rather than focusing specifically on the word knowledge potential. However, it is quite easy to direct the focus onto developing word knowledge.

Oral games are best to begin with, as most pre-schoolers have learned word games and rhymes—some involving finger play or actions, e.g.

Round and round the garden
Goes the teddy bear.
One step, two step—
Tickle under there.

In Italian (at the last line the children fall down):

Giro giro fondo
Cade il mondo
Cade la terra,
Tutti giù per terra.

Older children learn jingles involving chasing or skipping games:

Old Mother Moore. She lived by the shore.
She had children three and four.
The eldest one was twenty-four . . .

So a rhyme is a good way of starting a word game.

Pit Pat
What was that?
A big fat raindrop
On my hat!

You might need to explain to some children how we pretend with the rhyme that raindrops do make a

noise like 'pit pat', before going on to explore the sounds of the words—in this way perhaps:

- 'Let's think of or look for words that sound or look like hat: one starts with *s*—sat,' etc. This set can be made into a list and added to as children find suitable words, and they can be developed into other rhymes.

Or:

- 'Let's pretend we're doing the shopping. Who can think of things that start with *m*?—meat, milk.' (Use resources such as favourite books, pictures, children's drawings.)

If children know appropriate words in a language other than English, encourage their inclusion in oral games. For instance, in Italian:

- Words that start with *g*: gamba, gatto, gita.
- Words that end with *-azione*: stazione, gravitazione (this suffix is the equivalent of *-ation* in English).
- Words that have *uo* - suono, buono, duomo, tuono (*uo* is the same as [wɒ], as in 'want' in English).

In Vietnamese (which uses Roman script):

- Words that start with *d*: do, da, dê, du.
- Words that end with *-at*: mát, phát, lát.

Note, however, that though words with different endings may be pronounced the same, they have different meanings.

-ac	-at	-ăc	-ăt
các	cát	mắc	mắt
(several)	(sand)	(busy)	(eye)

Word Sorts

Word sorts provide children with opportunities to strengthen their understanding of words by allowing them to explore. They learn to formulate, test and evaluate their own hypotheses. The use of word sorts should also lead to generalisations about orthography and help develop children's understanding about meaning links among words.

Younger children may find it easier to physically organise words written on cards. Older children can consider a list of words printed on a sheet, which they can then reorganise, putting the words into different categories.

Closed Sorts

There are 'closed sorts' and 'open sorts'. In closed sorts you specify what your children should look for. You might focus on sounds in words: for example, in the following sort the children find words with [ε] sound, as in 'pet'.

beg	tell	sell
top	meet	tip
bit	set	went

You can make up other closed sorts focused on meaning, which might contain words suggesting speed, wetness, happiness and so on, or objects made of wood/plastic, designed to move/cut, etc.

Open Sorts

In 'open sorts' children can make up their own categories. Sometimes you may need to encourage them by asking the right kind of questions to take them from simple categories, e.g. sound links, to more complex categories, e.g. meaning links or usage. Here's an example.

Sort these words into as many categories as you can.

soft	shiny	even
shimmery	uneven	rough
hard	smooth	clammy

Children may:

start with s	organise words into 'opposite meanings'
soft	soft/hard
shiny	smooth/rough
smooth	uneven/even

Children in a group might decide to use the set of words to describe something.

a piece of seaweed	a mirror
soft	smooth
clammy	hard
uneven	shiny
shiny	even

As you can see, it's possible to have some words in the set left over.

Minimal Meaning Units

Word sorts are a good way of getting children to look at words and can be used as an introduction to 'minimal meaning units' in words. You might take as an example prefixes meaning 'not': *dis-* and *in-*, which becomes *im-* before 'p', and *ir-* before 'r', because it is easier to say that way.

inaccurate	impossible
inedible	impolite
irreversible	disengage
irreverent	disenchanted

You can mix some of these words in a sort with others which look similar—e.g. inflammable, irradiate, dispose—but in which the prefix has no negative force.

One reason it's useful for children to know *ir-* as a prefix meaning 'not', is so that in a word like *irreversible*, they will remember to use double 'r'—that is, taking the prefix *ir-* and adding the whole of the word *reversible*.

In Italian the prefix *s-* can reverse a word's meaning.

connesso - connected	sconnesso - disconnected
bilanciato - balanced	sbilanciato - unbalanced

Words describing some family relationships use the prefix *bis-* to denote 'great'.

bisnonno - great-grandfather
bisnonna - great-grandmother

In Vietnamese there are no prefixes. However, there are words denoting certain meanings, which stand in front of other words; for example:

gia - family
gia quyến - extended family
gia sản - family property
gia tài - family inheritance.

Meaning Links

Word sorting is also useful for developing children's understanding about meaning links among words. You might take a base word such as *hydro-* meaning 'water' (from Greek *hudor* water) and devise a sort like this.

hydrant	hydrogen	hydraulic
hyperbole	hydroponics	hypothermia
hydrofoil	hymnal	hysteria

In Italian the corresponding base word meaning 'water' is *idro-*:

idroaeroplano	idroponica.
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Among other English base words you could use are *micro-* (from Greek *mikros* small) and *magni-* (from Latin *magnus* large).

Meaning Links in Chinese

The system of writing Chinese is one of the most complex in the world. Nevertheless, it does, to an extent, make use of classification by meaning.

There are traditionally 214 'radicals', which are elements of most characters sharing related meanings. For example, the radical 木, originally a pictograph meaning 'tree', is used in many characters representing wooden objects.

桌 table 板 board 椅 chair

The radical 氵, three drops of water, is found in many characters related in meaning to water or liquids.

江 large river 泥 mud 波 wave
油 oil 汽 steam

Generally, this system gives no clue to pronunciation, and is being modified by the simplification and reclassification of the characters.

Borrowed Words

English has been evolving for more than a thousand years, incorporating words from Anglo-Saxon, Norse, Norman, French, Latin, Greek and other languages and dialects. This has meant that there is much overlap of meaning between words, and consequently English is enriched by a large number of synonyms.

Children are often spontaneously interested in where words come from and how they acquired the meanings they have. Tracing the origin of a word can make it more 'real' and increase a child's historical awareness as well as helping fix the word's meaning(s).

Children may become interested in what particular language words came from. Children from many countries may be proud of the words/idiom in English borrowed from their home languages.

Arabic	- alcohol, lute
Chinese	- tea, shanghai
French	- culottes, restaurant, entrepreneur, c'est la vie!
German	- kindergarten, langlauf, sauerkraut
Italian	- gelato, motto, lava
Japanese	- origami, bonsai, karate
Spanish	- mosquito, avocado, plaza

Borrowed Words from Aboriginal Languages

Quite a number of words in use in Australian English have come from a variety of Aboriginal languages—words such as:

yabber, meaning 'talk'; used in literature as a noun in 1855, by Raffaello Carboni in *The Eureka Stockade*: 'There was further a great waste of yabber-yabber about the diggers not being represented in the Legislative Council.'

The word was equally used as a verb too; for instance, in Ralph Boldrewood's *Robbery under Arms* (1888): 'But Jim and I could only stare and stand open-mouthed . . . while they'd yabber away quite comfortable.'

yakker (yakka, yaker), meaning 'work'; found in W. Ridley's *Kamilaroi* (1866). A.W. Upfield's *Death of a Swagman* (1946) has a typical usage: "Give us the shovel, Mr Jason," suggested Harry Hudson. "I'm used to hard yakker."

dillybag, meaning 'a small bag or basket'; found in Leichhardt's *Journal* (1847) simply as 'dilli', the Aboriginal word. It appears in its anglicised form in Mrs C. Praed's *Policy and Passion* (1881): 'Lord Dolph . . . armed with a dilly-bag and a trowel, clambered up the precipice to search for roots.'

Many place-names in Australia reflect Aboriginal names for places; for example, Parramatta, Wagga Wagga and Wollomooloo, which show rhyming vowels and repetition. Language activities might here be joined to developing skills in mapping: you can ask your children to find place-names with an Aboriginal origin and to put them on a map with notes about their meaning.

Current Borrowings and Coinings

Over a period of time many words change in meaning and usage. Encourage children to listen for words that are new to them, or that they hear adults discussing as new. They can write them down and discuss the meanings. For example:

'accord', from Latin and Old French, meaning 'agreement'; more recently *'the Accord'* - an agreement in Australia between unions, employers and government to keep the growth of wages steady for a period of time.

Comment on words you have heard that children may be interested in, e.g:

scuba - self-contained underwater breathing apparatus.

Check newspapers, pamphlets and journals, such as *Australian Geographic* and *Geo*, for words children might like to explore. For instance, an issue of *Geo* could produce:

wetlands (Kurnell Peninsula), migratory birds, estuarine.

Record all of these in a class book, e.g. 'Words that 4 P want to know about'. (Children can do this themselves.)

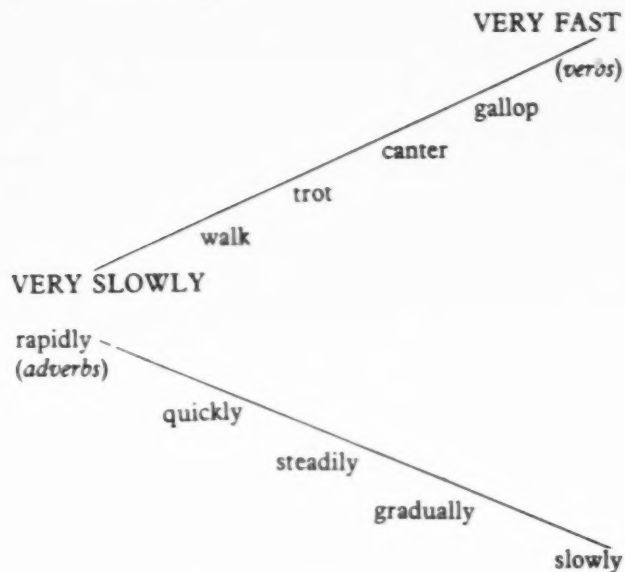
The name 'Kirribilli' was brought into the classroom after a visit to the Zoo.

Discuss advertising with children and particularly the way language is manipulated for a specific purpose. A useful starting point might be:

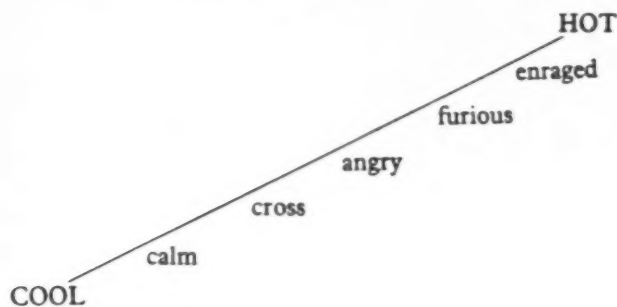
Bigs (the name of a brand of chips).

Word Clines

Most children are interested in sharing their knowledge of the range of meaning for words. Building up a visual picture for a group of words related by meaning can be both helpful and good fun. Take, for example, movement words which increase (or decrease) in speed.



Or words for feelings which increase in intensity.



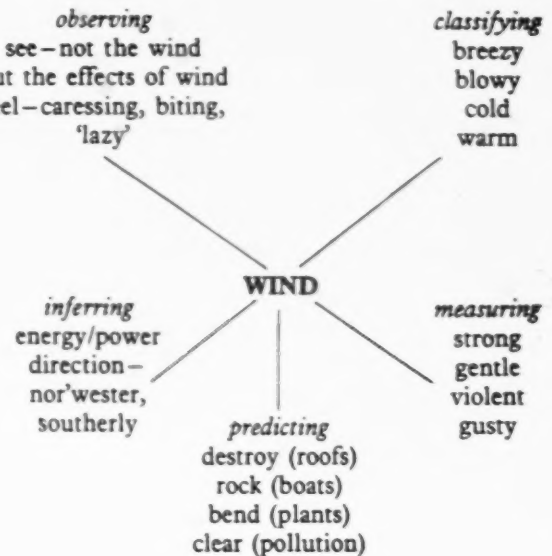
You can make the building of clines increasingly challenging.

- 1 Ask children to grade a given selection of words.
- 2 Give them the words at the top and bottom of the slope and ask them to find and grade words that can go in between.
- 3 Suggest an idea, e.g. temperature, light/dark, and ask them to build a cline by themselves, perhaps using a thesaurus.

Semantic Webbing

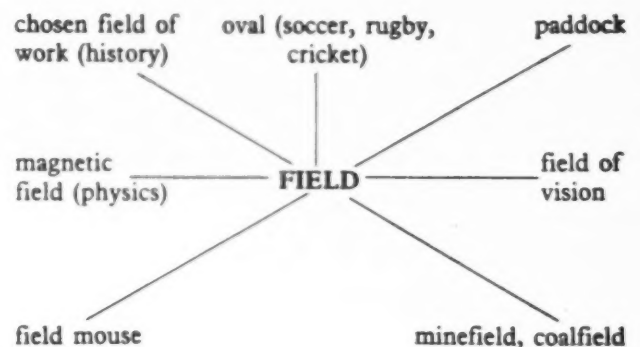
Semantic webbing is a way of clustering words related by meaning. It's a visual means of extending children's understanding of words across subject areas, developing their awareness of subtle shifts of meaning. It helps them link knowledge they have with new knowledge they are acquiring, and they

need to be encouraged to observe, classify, measure, predict or infer in order to make these meaning links. Here's an example of what might be done to cluster words around 'wind'.



Multiple Meanings

Of course many words have different meanings according to context, and one mark of a competent user of Australian English is the ability to use the same word in a wide range of contexts, which often require different meanings. A similar web diagram can be designed to explore the varied potential of words; here is one showing what might be done with 'field'.



Idiom

Although English usually provides a choice of words for a given context, there is often one word that has become the most appropriate word to use in a particular context. In the following sentence, for instance, the choice between *remnants* and *leftovers* is, you might say, predetermined:

What will we do with the — from lunch?
The choice of a word or words appropriate to a particular context is one aspect of idiom, which may be described as the habits of a language, accumulated

over long periods of usage. Some command of idiom is absorbed easily by children learning their first language, but it's by no means as easy to absorb the idiom of a second language. Idiom can be a great source of colour, particularly in Australian English, but it is also a source of confusion, misspelling and misuse, especially for second-language learners.

Many idioms take the form of phrases which signify something other than their literal meaning, and this naturally leads to misunderstanding. For instance, we find:

- 'butterflies in her stomach' has been misquoted as 'elephants in her stomach'—perhaps for emphasis;
- to be 'fed-up' has been taken to mean 'having eaten enough';
- 'hold on!' and 'hang on!' have often made children look around for something to hold on to.

Children should always be encouraged to share idioms they hear or read for the first time and to ask questions if they are puzzled. Only in this way can we be confident that they are understanding the idioms they encounter and expanding their range of command.

Collocations

Collocations form an important element in English idiom. They are words that have combined to make groups or phrases 'frozen' together by the consensus of usage. 'Butterflies in her stomach' is a collocation. Many collocations depend on

rhyme ('by hook or by crook')
alliteration ('sink or swim') or
assonance ('fair and square')

to knit them together and make them memorable. But, like other aspects of idiom, they are subject to fashion.

In Vietnamese, 'mother and father' collocate in a similar way to English: cha mẹ. However, the English translation of some Vietnamese collocations may sound strange to English speakers. For example, someone going to buy a pair of shoes would say:

'[I'm off to buy] shoe and sandal.'
 '[.....] giày dép.'

This should help us understand why children learning English as a second language sometimes use odd collocations: they may be borrowing from their first language, not knowing 'what goes with what' in English.

A major advantage of knowing collocations is that it helps children predict in their reading. Again, encourage discussion and questions from your children to make sure that collocations are recognised and understood. Here are some that you might like to present to them.

black and blue	rough and ready
lock, stock and barrel	spick and span
make or break	thick and thin
might and main	wear and tear

Last Suggestions

- ☐ Look for evidence that children are using words discussed, recorded in notebooks, brought into school or heard on radio and television programs.
- ☐ Structure language activities so that children are called upon to use or explain the meaning of words in a particular context.
- ☐ Ensure that lists, banks and resources of words are dynamic—open to change, discussion and constant reference.
- ☐ Get children to work together so that they can exchange words and ideas.
- ☐ Remember—it's probably better that children deduce rules for using and spelling words themselves. Teaching rules too early and out of context may just confuse them. Beware the fate of the centipede!

The centipede was happy quite
 Until the toad in fun
 Said, 'Pray which leg goes after which?'
 And worked her mind to such a pitch
 She lay distracted in the ditch
 Considering how to run.

Anon.

Recommended Reading

V.F. Allen, *Techniques in Teaching Vocabulary*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1985.
 Linda G. Geller, *Wordplay and Language Learning for Children*, National Council of Teachers of English, Urbana, Ill., 1985.
Spelling R-7 Language Arts, English Language Curriculum Services Unit, Education Dept of South Australia, Adelaide, 1984.

Related PENs still available from PETA include:

- 34 Diana Pearce, *Language and Social Studies*.
- 42 Ken Imison, *Language Activities for the Gifted*.
- 43 Richard Parker, *Towards more Nutritious Reading Programs*.
- 46 Judy Turner, *Spelling in the Total Language Program*.
- 50 Barbara Kelly, *What's in a Word?*

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 P O Box 167 Rozelle NSW 2039